



Saskatchewan
Agriculture
and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

INDEX

ILOs A POSITIVE SOURCE FOR
RURAL EMPLOYMENT.....07-08-36

REGINA-BASED SEED COMPANY
SOWS NEW OATS 07-08-37

RESTAURANT GIANT THE LATEST
TO BAN TRANSFATS 07-08-38

PRAIRIE CONSERVATION CONFERENCE
ATTRACTS INTERNATIONAL INTEREST 07-08-39

DEADLINE APPROACHING FOR
WATER SUPPLY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM 07-08-40

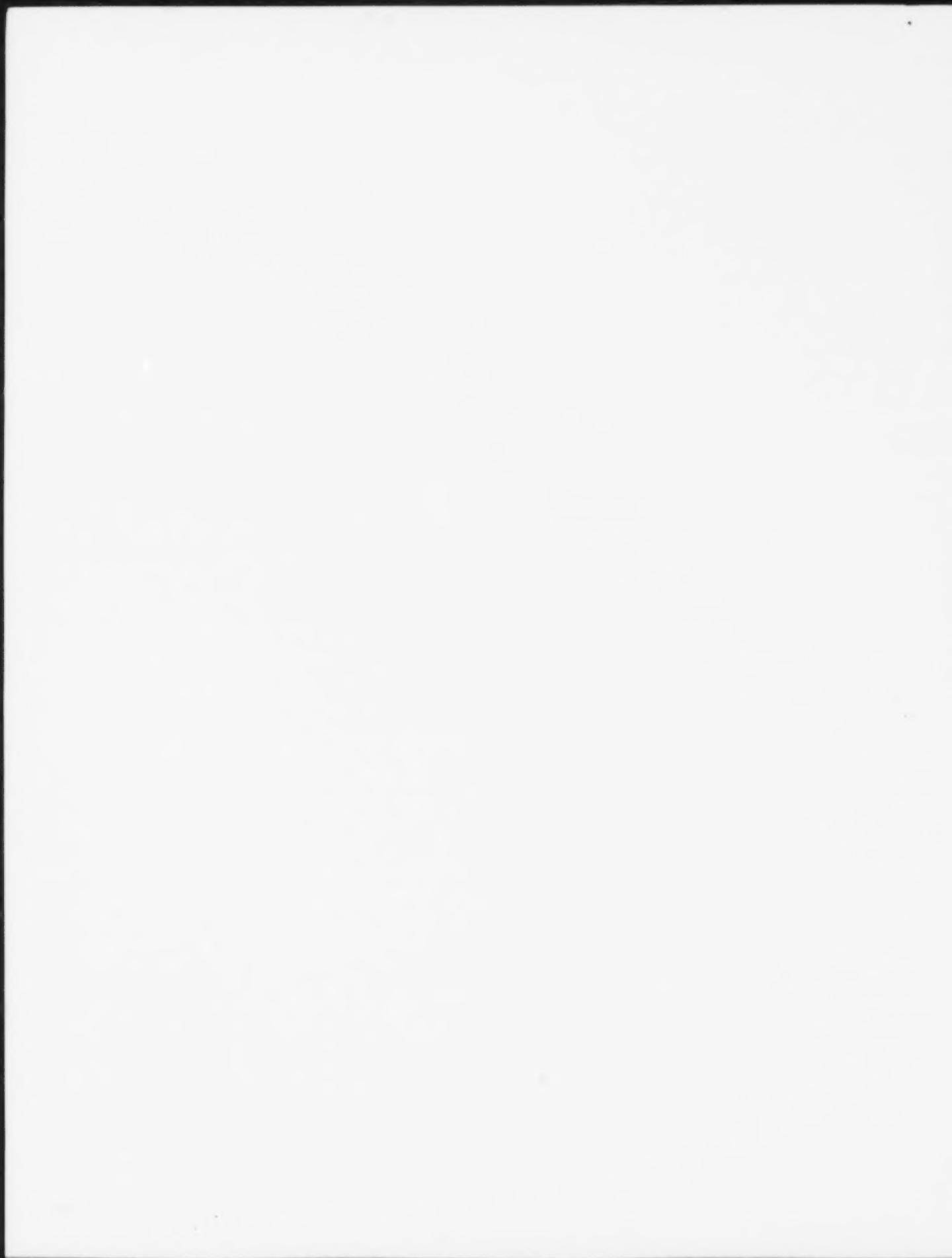
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Log Number: 07-08-36
Week of February 19, 2007

ILOs A POSITIVE SOURCE FOR RURAL EMPLOYMENT

Livestock production has always been part of the make-up of farming in the province.

The move to establishing intensive livestock operations (ILOs) is a logical step based on that history, and is a good source of economic development for rural and small-town Saskatchewan. Not only does it integrate well with other value-added initiatives, such as meat packing plants or ethanol facilities, it also provides a steady stream of employment to keep young people and families in the region.

Jim Birch, a Human Resources Development Specialist with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF), has witnessed the positive economic impact these enterprises have had on rural Saskatchewan.

"ILOs and cow-calf operations are recognized as good employers, and are more and more able to offer year-round work. They are even bringing people back to the province to be closer to friends and family members," Birch said.

"The operations are paying competitive wages, and the larger ones regularly offer benefit packages. They offer medical and dental plans, long- and short-term disability and assistance in purchasing RSPs. They offer flexible hours, making it possible for part-time work, which is particularly attractive for parents with school-age kids. In some cases, rural spouses are entering or re-entering the work force as a result of ILOs in their area, too."

Another aspect that Birch feels appeals to many potential employees is the diversity of work ILOs offer, depending on the type of livestock raised there. For example, the pork production units offer opportunities for those preferring inside work. Feedlots appeal to those preferring to work mainly outdoors with cattle. Dairy units offer a variety of different jobs—year-round work inside the barns and seasonal work outside putting up feed.

Birch says that ILO operators are increasingly willing to invest in education and training opportunities for their employees. "This sort of commitment often helps employers retain their staff for the long haul. Employees obtain satisfaction from acquiring new skills, and appreciate the employer providing them with opportunities to better themselves," he noted.

"Employers also know that assets like skills training and safety courses raise the productivity, know-how and morale of their workforces, which only benefits the profitability and success of their operations."

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ILOs are able to offer on-site training through the Saskatchewan Institutes of Applied Science and Technology, regional colleges or SAF's Green Certificate Training program, leading to certification. The very large operations sometimes offer in-house training developed within the company.

Even so, like many sectors of the economy today, ILOs can also encounter difficulty finding enough skilled workers to meet their needs. For its part, Birch says that SAF is willing to offer assistance in a number of ways to help these operations address their human resource challenges.

"We can link employers with a variety of agencies that will help them to recruit or locate willing employees. We can provide tips on preparing job descriptions and writing job advertisements. We can direct them to contacts for interpreting labour legislation," he said.

Birch noted that SAF is co-operating with Métis employment agencies and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations to ensure that aboriginal workers are aware of opportunities in the livestock production and processing sectors.

SAF also maintains a relationship with the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program, under which employers identify and nominate workers in other countries to come to Saskatchewan to fill holes in the workforce. "We can provide assistance to producers or ILO managers wishing to investigate this option, as well," Birch said.

- 30 -

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REGINA-BASED SEED COMPANY SOWS NEW OATS

A seed of an idea has grown into a new agri-business for the Regina-based FarmPure group of companies.

The FarmPure group grew out of Quality Assured Seeds of Regina, and out of CEO Trenton Baisley's desire to develop new value-added products.

"When we looked at some of the wonderful varieties that we've had the opportunity to commercialize, we realized there were some very good opportunities to take things through to consumer-ready goods, so that's what really started us on the path of value creation," said Baisley.

Three years ago, FarmPure changed its vision statement to read: "To create the most rewarding and sustainable value chains in the world for our stakeholders and customers." Baisley says this made all the difference in the company's approach to doing business.

The concept of getting the most from the value chain led to the formation of the FarmPure family of companies: FarmPure Foods, FarmPure Beverages, FarmPure Seeds, FarmPure Global and FarmPure Financial.

"Each of those companies deals in various value-chain initiatives, both in Canada and internationally, and from that we've spawned the food side," explained Baisley. "We've made our first brick-and-mortar investment here in Regina, which is a Pure Oat plant."

The plant will use a proprietary oat-roasting process to produce consumer-ready foods under the "Only Oats"™ label. "The process that we use to roast and toast our oats is different from any other oat manufacturing in the world. We think it gives a very nice flavour, and we've certainly had good feedback," Baisley said.

FarmPure developed the Pure Oat variety for people with gluten- or wheat-intolerant diets, but expects the product will also be used by those who just want to be healthy, as well.

Baisley says FarmPure already has a lot of formal expressions of interest for the product, and FarmPure staff is hitting the road this month to find more companies and food retailers to carry the "Only Oats"™ line, which uses the Pure Oat variety exclusively.

(more)

Baisley is also heading to Winnipeg for the launch of a FarmPure Beverages product. FarmPure's beverage mix, "Nu Bru"TM, is being used by Winnipeg's Fort Gary Breweries to make its Golden Lager beer.

"Nu Bru"TM is a really exciting patent process that we've come up with," said Baisley. "It all started out in developing a gluten-free beer for the celiac market, but our process makes a very neutral base that we can flavour into berry coolers, wine coolers or beer. It also lends itself to be blended with existing malt-based beverages to enhance taste and foaming."

Baisley says that, after a career that has seen moves to Alberta and Chicago, he and his family are happy to be home in Saskatchewan, where he has been able to pursue his personal goals.

"It's been a personal aspiration to have either a division or a company, something you could kind of put your thumbprint on where you make a difference in a corporation. So this has been a pretty exciting opportunity for me personally."

Once the new Regina plant is ready for production, Baisley anticipates that "Only Oats"TM will be available at a variety of retailers in Regina and beyond. The company is also continuing to design new flavours and products in its test kitchen.

Baisley says there's no forgetting the seeds that started it all. "The core of our business is still pedigreed seed, but as we say now, 'our business is value creation.'"

- 30 -

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RESTAURANT GIANT THE LATEST TO BAN TRANSFATS

You know it's more than a fad when even the Golden Arches get on the bandwagon.

Restaurant giant McDonald's has announced that it is switching to cooking oil with less than two per cent transfat.

McDonald's announced that it would make the switch five years ago. After years of research, it has now chosen an oil blend based on canola oil with some soy and corn oil. Currently, 1,200 of McDonald's 13,000 U.S. restaurants are using the oil, with more to follow suit in the coming months.

The move from the fast food leader comes on the heels of similar switches by the likes of KFC and Wendy's. Burger King is also considering a similar move to reduce the amount of trans fats in its products.

The City of New York's Board of Health recently took the unprecedented step of banning trans fats in all restaurants in the city by July 2008.

Shika Agblor, a Senior Food Scientist with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, says it's been a well-known and well-documented fact that trans fats are unhealthy.

"Trans fats have been a concern for some time. Trans fats raise certain lipid levels in the blood that produce high cholesterol levels. High cholesterol levels lead to heart attacks, strokes and cardiovascular problems. So that's why there is a need to reduce trans fats," Agblor explained.

She says food manufacturers and restaurants are now responding to demand from consumers.

"People are looking to eat healthily, whether that is in a restaurant or at home. They want products that will help them attain that level of health," Agblor said.

"The trend in the next 15 years is toward health and wellness, so consumers are saying to manufacturers, 'We need to see a change in the food we purchase.' That's where it is coming from. The consumer is driving the agenda, and restaurants need to respond."

While trans fats have been the focus lately, Agblor says scientists are trying to stay ahead of consumer demands, and sugar is one product getting a lot of attention.

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"There are solutions, but you need to be innovative. We know that obesity is a precursor to a lot of diseases, and we know that consumers keep asking for products that can help with weight management," she stated.

"So a lot of people are looking towards foods that have a low glycemic index or no sugar added. We then have to determine what kind of alternatives we can put in the product to have the same sweetness."

As always, the challenge is how to make a product healthy without sacrificing the taste. In the case of McDonald's, that task was particularly daunting, given the iconic status of its signature french fries.

However, after testing 18 varieties of oil and over 50 different blends, McDonald's is confident it has found the formula to keep out the trans fats, but keep in the signature taste and texture of its fries.

- 30 -

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PRAIRIE CONSERVATION CONFERENCE ATTRACTS INTERNATIONAL INTEREST

A conservation convention with a global flair is coming once again to Saskatchewan.

The eighth annual Prairie Conservation and Endangered Species Conference (PCESC) and Workshop will be held at the Delta Hotel in Regina from March 1 to 3, 2007.

The seminar is held every three years, rotating amongst Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Karyn Scalise, Manager of the Prairie Conservation Action Plan, says conference organizers have put together a terrific agenda that focuses on successfully combining ecological and economic interests.

"The theme of our conference this year is 'Homes on the Range: Conservation in Working Prairie Landscapes.' We live and earn a living on the prairies alongside thousands of plant and animal species, including some that are at risk. This conference looks at ways that relationship can work positively for all of us," Scalise said.

"For example, most of the species at risk in Saskatchewan are found in the grasslands. Most of those lands are managed for livestock production, and there's a lot of common ground between the needs of species at risk and what livestock producers provide through their management practices."

This year's PCESC has been organized around six main themes: Growing People and Communities; Ecological Services; Climate Change; Endangered Species and Spaces; Invasive Species and Diseases; and Water Management. These themes will be the focus of concurrent workshops running on Friday and Saturday afternoon, set up by keynote plenary addresses on both mornings.

It is common for the conference to attract considerable international attention, and Scalise says this year's session is no different. "We have delegates registered all the way from West Africa, we have a couple of people from the University of Sweden, and some people from Nairobi, Kenya," she noted.

But not all of the guests from far-off places will be in the audience. "We are also featuring a variety of reputable international speakers, who will be presenting side by side with local experts from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina," Scalise said.

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One speaker of particular interest will be L. Hunter Lovins, the president and founder of Natural Capitalism, Inc. in Colorado. According to Scalise, Lovins received the Time Magazine "Hero of the Planet" Award in 2000, primarily for her work taking big corporations and "making them green." Her presentation will be on "The Integrated Bottom Line."

Scalise expects attendance for the conference to top 400 people. "When it started, the seminar was largely a forum for people who were either academics or directly involved in conservation groups," she observed.

"It's turned a corner in the past few years, and there's been a lot more interest from actual land managers and ranchers who operate on the native prairie. We have producers who are speaking at some of our workshops, and we expect to attract many more as delegates."

Registration for the PCESC is \$225 per person, including two lunches, a banquet and an evening mixer on Thursday night at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum. Although registration will be accepted at the door, interested delegates are asked to register in advance, if possible. This can be done on the conference website at www.pcesc.ca, or by calling (306) 569-8799.

More details on the seminar can also be found on the website.

- 30 -

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DEADLINE APPROACHING FOR WATER SUPPLY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Farmers wishing to access financial assistance under the Canada-Saskatchewan Water Supply Expansion Program have until March 1, 2007, to file their applications.

The deadline applies to Tier One/On-Farm Infrastructure projects under the program.

Mark Geremia, Regional Ag-Water Manager with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC), says this part of the program is relevant to projects on individual farms.

"It mostly pertains to small on-farm projects that include the dugout water supplies, wells and pasture pipelines. Typically, they are serving as livestock watering systems," he stated.

The objective of the Water Supply Expansion Program is to provide assistance to the agricultural community to reduce the risk of future water shortages, and to meet water needs through the planning and development of secure, healthy and reliable water resources.

Successful applicants can receive funding for up to one-third of eligible project costs to a maximum of \$5,000 per project.

"We target the best management practices for developing a better, more sustainable water supply," said Geremia. "Some examples would be getting dugouts located in the best area for collecting run-off and sizing them properly, or having direct cattle access excluded to protect the longevity of the dugout."

Applicants must complete an application for assistance, which includes project information such as location, description, estimated project costs, estimated start and completion dates, and sources of funding. Assistance is tied to the cost of materials and labour required to develop the eligible water source.

Geremia says it is important for applicants to consider the long-term implications of their projects.

"We would like the opportunity to work with applicants to see if there are options for more reliable water supplies than collecting run-off in a dugout," he noted. "For example, you could be looking at pasture pipeline systems that would take water from a reliable well site, which could be cost-competitive with building a standard dugout in some instances."

(more)

The application forms for assistance are available from AAFC and PFRA (Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration) offices, the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, and also online at www.agr.gc.ca/h2o. Interested producers can also learn more by calling 1-800-667-8567.

Geremia says there is plenty of support available for anyone who is developing an application under the program.

"We have a network of field offices where we have technicians who can help with some pre-planning," he stated.

It is important to note that this is the final year of the four-year national Water Supply Expansion Program, and therefore, the March 1 deadline is the last chance to take advantage of this funding.

- 30 -

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